



Migration intentions of rural youth in the Westhoek, Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

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‘Should I stay or should I leave my home region?’ is one of the key life course questions that many young people must address as they grow to maturity. Social mobility increasingly presupposes geographical mobility, especially in rural areas. The consequences of the selective out-migration of socially mobile young people (‘brain drain’) are seen as a threat to the economic development and reputation of rural areas. The out-migration of young rural people is often related to participation in higher education and entrance into the labour market. This paper focuses on the migration intentions of pupils in secondary education in two peripheral rural areas: The Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands. It analyses, by means of logistic regression analysis, the migration intentions of 611 pupils in the Westhoek and 294 pupils in the Veenkoloniën in relation to their social background, migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and the way they identify with their home region. In both regions, perceived employment opportunities and local attachment appear to be the most important factors explaining migration intentions. In the Veenkoloniën, in contrast with the Westhoek, migration history, educational level and representations of the region are also important factors determining the migration intentions of young people. These results can be explained by differences in the structure, culture and landscape of the two regions.

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1. Introduction

Many rural areas in North-West Europe experience a net out-migration of the young population (Council of Europe, 1980; Rees et al., 1996; Muil et al., 2004; Jauhainen, 2009; King et al., 2006; Thissen and Poelman, 2009). Highly educated young people in particular are inclined to leave these areas. Policymakers are concerned about this ‘brain drain’ and see the selective out-migration of socially mobile young people as a threat to the economic development and reputation of the region (Stockdale, 2006). A growing number of rural areas in Europe is facing a decline in population that is related to the ageing of the European population. In addition, they are experiencing a second wave of dejuvenation resulting from the rising participation of young rural people in higher education and their migration to national employment centres (King, 2002; Harts, 2008; Findlay et al., 2009). This concerns not only rural regions at NUTS-2 level that are a great distance from the main metropolitan regions in Europe but also

peripheral rural regions at NUTS-3 level within small urbanized countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium.

For young people, the question ‘Should I stay or should I leave my home region?’ is only one of the many they face as they grow to maturity. Staying in the region where one was born is no longer a matter of course, but the result of an individual life course decision (Garasky, 2002; Mulder, 2003). Social mobility increasingly presupposes geographical mobility, especially in rural areas (Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale, 2004). The globalization of the economy and the social and cultural processes involved in individualization mean that young people have become less dependent on the opportunities within the region in which they were born (Liefbroer and De Jong Gierveld, 1995).

The transition from secondary to higher education is crucial because it provides the impetus for young people to decide to migrate (Mulder and Clark, 2002). Most rural areas have limited educational opportunities. Moreover, many young people prefer to continue their education in an urban setting. Consequently, one group of young people makes their permanent home outside their home region, while another group returns to their home region after graduation. Not all of them will – temporarily or permanently – leave their home area. Some commute from their parental home to college or

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university in a nearby urban centre, while others decide not to participate in higher education and stay in their home area instead. Entry into the labour market is another important impetus when deciding whether to leave or to stay. Employment opportunities, in particular for the more highly educated, are scarce in many peripheral rural areas (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004; Muilu and Rusanen, 2003).

Although globalization and individualization are common characteristics of all North-West European countries, the consequences of this for the migration-decisions of young people in rural areas differ. This is partly because of differences in education and employment structure and partly because of cultural differences. Despite the uniforming effects of general developments such as urbanization, Europeanization and globalization, rural areas in Europe still exhibit many differences. Rurality in Europe is nation-specific (Hoggart et al., 1995). Some rural areas offer fewer opportunities and are more distant from urban centres than others. Countries and regions are culturally different with respect to the individualization of young people. This can influence the mean age at which young people leave the parental home, whether single young people live independently (Corijn and Manting, 2000) and the importance of the home region in the identity formation of young people (Bauman, 1992; Jones, 1999). Countries differ in their size, settlement structure and position within Europe. Countries and regions differ in amenities that are of growing importance for a more consumptive (residential or recreational) development (Steenbekkers et al., 2006). Finally, rural regions have a different settlement history, which has consequences for whether the inhabitants feel that they belong and how they identify with the region.

Whereas recent studies on rural youth migration in Europe refer to one specific region or to regions within one national context, this article analyses the migration intentions of the rural youth in two different national contexts in Europe: the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium (see also Thissen et al., 2007), and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands. It analyses the migration intentions of pupils in secondary education in relation to background characteristics, migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region. The comparison of the migration intentions of the rural youth in two rural regions within two different nations in Europe allows us to evaluate the meaning of structural and cultural factors within different regional and national contexts. This provides an illustration of the nation-specific meaning of rurality in Europe.

2. Rural youth migration

The theme of rural youth migration can be approached both from the perspective of the region and from the perspective of the young individual. The first approach focuses on the economic development of rural areas and on villages as social milieus (Stockdale, 2006). Some important issues are the rate and type of employment in the region, the characteristics of the labour supply within the region and the age structure and social cohesion within the local communities. The economic and social capital within the region and the communities are considered success factors; young people are supposed to make a start in adult life and form their own identities within the home region and community (Coleman, 1988; Stolle and Hooghe, 2004; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006). From this perspective, a net out-migration of the young population is seen as a failure.

From the perspective of the young individual, geographical mobility (migration) is related to social mobility (Rye, 2006a). In the life course decisions of the current generation of young people, the region and community where one is born has become less

relevant than in former generations. Socially mobile young people focus on educational and employment opportunities outside their home region. Staying in their home region is just one of many options. An attachment to the place where they were born is no longer decisive in the identity formation of rural young people (Jones, 1999). A place is seen more and more as somewhere to reside in the short-term at a specific time of life. Highly educated young people are increasingly cosmopolitan rather than being 'deeply rooted' in the rural community (Keur and Keur, 1955; De Valk, 2006; Weenink, 2008). However, even in a globalizing world not everybody is a globalist. According to Gustafson (2001), a dichotomy exists, in which the poor and powerless are strongly attached to the (localized) place where they live as a defensive reaction to globalizing forces. From this individualized perspective, the successful development of a region and community depends more on the ability to attract adult return migrants or newcomers who have accumulated human and social capital elsewhere.

The ability to retain the young population or to attract new or return migrants who are at a later stage of their life course depends on the characteristics of the region as well as the characteristics of the potential migrants. With respect to the region, it is clear that remote rural areas in North-West Europe have faced a decline in employment opportunities for many decades as a result of globalization and an economic shift from primary and secondary production toward tertiary and quaternary sector production, and an increasing scaling of the economy. As a result, rural areas have become less and less attractive for young people on their way to adulthood. A net out-migration of the young population is therefore a common feature of most rural areas (Rees et al., 1996; Muilu et al., 2004; Harts, 2008; King et al., 2006).

In the most peripheral areas in North-West Europe, such as parts of the United Kingdom, Germany and the Nordic countries, the net out-migration of the young is part of a general process of rural population decline. These remote areas have endured a downward spiral of economic deterioration, population decline, vacancy and loss of community life (Stockdale, 2006). In some of these areas, an influx of older age groups, mainly the fifty-plus group, counterbalances the net out-migration of the younger ones. This process of counterurbanization has resulted in a shift from productive to consumptive (residential, recreational) functions (Champion, 1981; Marsden, 1998; Muilu et al., 2004; Jauhiainen, 2009). The most attractive of those areas are even able to attract employment in new economic sectors and to attract return migrants and newcomers from younger age groups who can work in these new economic sectors.

'Peripheral', together with its accompanying component of 'proximity', is a relative notion. The concepts of 'periphery' and 'core' do not just refer to physical or spatial characteristics. According to Lagendijk and Lorentzen (2007, p. 460), these concepts are related to "the shaping of territorial bounded spaces, along social, institutional, political and economic dimensions". In fact, the difference in power determines the difference between core and periphery. Unlike geographical distance, which can easily change with changing means of transportation and communication, the dimensions above are persistent.

In a growing number of rural areas within small urbanized countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium the out-migration of the young population is part of a national or sub-national migration system that has been termed the 'escalator' model (Fielding, 1992; Floor et al., 2006; Findlay et al., 2009). Moreover, the 'peripheral' rural areas, among them the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands, struggle with a negative image and are unable to attract large numbers of highly educated young adults or to create new high level employment opportunities (Harts, 2008; WES, 2005).

The migration intentions of young rural people can be understood in the social and cultural context of the family, the community, the region and the nation state. Educational level and an orientation toward higher education are traditionally seen as an important social background characteristic for explaining migration intentions (Aassve et al., 2002; Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Stockdale, 2006). Gender differences are relevant in this respect as female adolescents usually have higher educational aspirations and are more oriented toward education that leads to tertiary and quaternary sector jobs than males (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Corbett, 2007). Parents are increasingly more highly educated and encourage their children in their educational aspirations. In Flanders as well as in the Netherlands the parents' educational levels are a strong predictor of the educational level of their children (Elchardus and Siongers, 2003).

The migration history of young people and their parents forms another important determinant of migration intentions. According to Pollini (2005), socio-territorial belonging is primarily connected with 'birth and residence'. Those who are rooted in the region and local community, that is, who were born and raised in their home region and whose families have lived in this region for many generations, are more inclined to stay than young people who were born elsewhere or whose parents or grandparents come from outside the region (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Jamieson, 2000; Thissen, 1999). The settlement history of the region means that differences between rural regions in Europe can be expected. Some regions, such as the Flemish countryside, have a long history of human settlement and a tradition of rootedness (De Decker et al., 1987; Thissen et al., 2001), whereas other rural regions, such as the peat-cutting areas and the new polders in the Netherlands, have only recently been colonized (Constandse, 1972).

Employment prospects are a third important factor in explaining migration intentions (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004; Stockdale, 2006). While most colleges and universities recruit their students regionally and many students, in particular in Flanders, continue to live with their parents (Corijn and Manting, 2000), most students in higher education who come from rural areas leave their home region and do not return after graduation because of the lack of employment opportunities for the more highly educated in that region. Those students who decide to commute from their parental home to college or university are inclined to leave their home region after graduation as soon as they enter the labour market because of better employment prospects for highly educated people in more urbanized regions (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Jamieson, 2000; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2004; Stockdale, 2006).

The migration intentions of young people are not only related to social position, but also to the way they identify with their region of origin. Regional identities can be defined as the specific meanings that are attached to a region by an actor or group of actors with different interests in the region (Groote et al., 2000; Simon, 2005). Identities are social constructions, since they are ascribed to regions by people. Regional identity is a multidimensional concept encompassing aspects of what regions and communities represent, feelings of attachment to regions and communities, and self-identification in terms of global, national, regional or local identities. Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006) state that identification with a certain community or neighbourhood has increasingly become a matter of personal choice, since the spatial constraints of social interactions have been eroded because of developments in mobility and technology. This implies that being born and having grown up in a certain rural area does not automatically result in a regional or local identity and a strong attachment to the home community or region. Young people do not always view living in a rural context positively. According to Rye (2006b), the 'rural dull' is a better description of

what rural life means for some young rural people than the 'rural idyll'. Young women in particular are confronted with a male-dominated culture in rural communities (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Little, 2002; Cloke and Little, 1997; Rye, 2006b; Stockdale, 2004; Valentine et al., 2007). In this respect, the regional characteristics and the national context are important factors in the identity formation of young people. Rural regions differ in landscape characteristics and therefore have different perspectives for developing consumptive functions. Regional identities as social constructs are affected by national opinions about rurality (Haartsen et al., 2003; Steenbekkers et al., 2006).

3. Research areas

This study of the migration intentions of young rural people was conducted in two rural areas in a peripheral location within the national context of two small urbanized countries: the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium and the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands (Fig. 1). The size of both regions is comparable. The Westhoek consists of three 'arrondissements' (in Belgium NUTS-3 regions). One of the arrondissements, the arrondissement Ieper (Ypres), is the research area (Fig. 2a). The Veenkoloniën is more or less equal to one NUTS-3 region in the Netherlands and is part of the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe (NUTS-2 regions). The research area consists of a selection of settlements (Fig. 2b).

Both study regions have a peripheral position within their countries. Although the physical distance of both regions to 'the centre' is not great – the centre of both is less than 100 km away from main urban centres (Groningen and Ghent) and less than 200 km from the national capitals (Brussels and Amsterdam) – they are both peripheral in terms of the aforementioned dimensions (Lagendijk and Lorentzen, 2007). Both regions are struggling with economic decline, demographic stagnation and a net out-migration of the young population.

The Westhoek, with about 200,000 inhabitants, can be seen as the most rural region within Flanders (Kesteloot and Meys, 2008) with its peripheral location by the North Sea and its borders with



Fig. 1. The position of the Veenkoloniën within the Netherlands and the Westhoek within Flanders, Belgium.

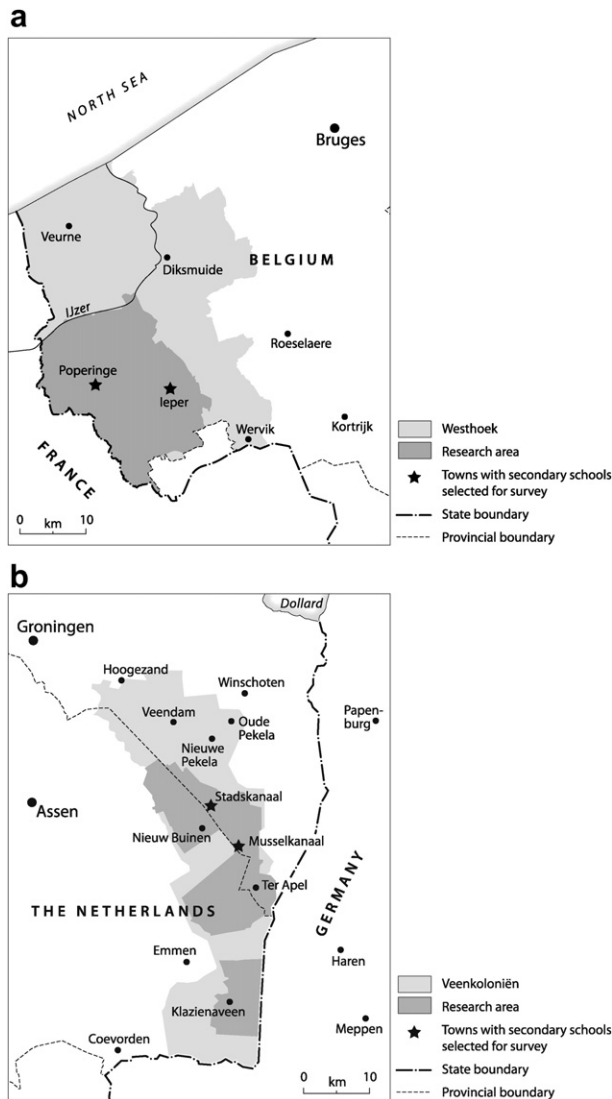


Fig. 2. a. The research region within the Westhoek in Flanders, Belgium. b The research region within the Veenkoloniën, The Netherlands.

France and Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium. The region is relatively sparsely populated (within the context of a highly urbanized Flanders) and has no clear urban centre. Small settlements predominate. More than seventy percent of the settlements have fewer than 2000 inhabitants and twenty-five percent even fewer than 500 inhabitants (De Roo and Thissen, 1997). The southern part of the Westhoek, the area of the region included in the research project, is an attractive area with an open, hilly landscape and predominantly agricultural land. Ieper (Ypres), a pleasant historical town with 20,000 inhabitants, is the main urban centre. Some of the most important battlefields of the First World War (1914–1918) can be found in the region, and the river IJzer (Yser) was an important frontline. The region has several heritage sites related to its First World War history.

The region has a long history of human occupation and a settlement history that goes back to the Middle Ages (Van der Haegen et al., 2000). The Westhoek is traditionally an agricultural region with agriculture-related industries. The decline in agricultural and industrial employment has partly been compensated for by an increase in the service sector. However, the employment structure is relatively weak and employment prospects are unfavourable, especially for highly educated people. The demographic

development is therefore characterized by a strong out-migration of young adults (20–35 years old) (WES, 2005; RESOC, 2006). This out-migration concentrates on the main centres of higher education, Ghent in particular.

The Veenkoloniën is situated in the northeast of the Netherlands near the German border and also has about 200,000 inhabitants. It is the Dutch part of the Bourtanger Moor, which used to cover the whole northern border area of Germany and the Netherlands. Large-scale peat digging started around 1600 AD, continued until the 1980s and developed from north to south. The removal of the peat layer left a vast area of agricultural land and the region became populated by long villages stretching along the existing canals. Economic activity in these villages was partly agricultural but also industrial, with shipyards and factories that produced equipment for the processing of peat, as well as agricultural processing industries.

According to Voerman (2001), this scattered industrial, and hence scattered residential structure prevented the rise of a clear urban centre. Hoogezand-Sappemeer (35,000 inhabitants), Stadskanaal (34,000), Veendam (28,000) and Winschoten (19,000) are today's main centres. Human settlement started relatively late, from 1600 onwards in the northern part and 1900 onwards in the southern part.

Despite national policy measures to improve the economic situation and to compensate for the decline in agricultural and industrial employment, the region faces many social and economic problems, such as job losses, high unemployment rates, low educational levels and low incomes (In't Veld-Langeveld, 1957; Terluin et al., 1999). The region is still one of the least developed in the Netherlands, with above-average unemployment. The open, man-made agricultural landscape is relatively unattractive for residential use. During the 1990s the total population declined. In recent years the total population has increased slightly, but the migration balance is still negative with respect to the 15–25-year-old age group (CBS Statline, 2008).

Although both regions have a peripheral position within their country in common, they differ in at least one respect that is important for our research: they have a different history of human settlement. The Westhoek has a long history of human settlement and rootedness, whereas the Veenkoloniën was only recently colonized. This might mean that migration history has a significant effect on the migration intentions of young people.

4. Data and methods

Data on migration intentions was collected by means of a structured questionnaire given to 611 pupils at nine secondary schools in Ieper and Poperinge in the Westhoek and 294 pupils at two secondary schools in Stadskanaal and Musselkanaal in the Veenkoloniën. In both regions, the pupils were in the 13–21 age band. In both regions, 97 percent of the pupils were in the 13–18 age group. In April 2005 (the Westhoek) and April 2004 (the Veenkoloniën) the pupils completed the questionnaire during a school lesson after being instructed by Bachelor's students of human geography at the University of Amsterdam who helped develop the questionnaire and who were trained as interviewers as part of a research methods module.

In the questionnaire, the dependent variable of migration intentions is derived from a question about the preferred place of residence after leaving the parental home and finishing education. The resulting variable was dichotomized into 'within the region' and 'outside the region'. The relationship between migration intentions and background characteristics, migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region was estimated by means of logistic regression models. Following the analysis of Bjarnason and Thorlindsson

(2006), consecutive regression models introduced new sets of variables in order to analyse the effect of such a new set of variables on the relationship between migration intentions and other sets of variables. The frequencies of all variables included in the analysis are presented for both regions in Table 1.

Model 1 presents the B coefficients of the first logistic regression model, and demonstrates the relative importance of personal characteristics and migration history for migration intentions. In this model migration intentions are predicted by background variables only. Model 2 introduces the additional effect of the perceptions of employment opportunities. This model estimates the predictive value of structural factors on migration intentions and allows the possibility to distinguish between the direct effect of the background variables and the indirect effect of perceived employment prospects. Model 3 demonstrates the additional effect of cultural factors or the identification with the home region (Tables 2 and 3).

The background characteristics in Model 1 refer to gender, parental household (traditional versus non-traditional families, i.e. two-parent families versus other families), parental support (based on the statement 'My parents always encourage me to perform well at school') and educational level. In the Westhoek, the following educational levels were distinguished: ASO (general secondary education), TSO (technical secondary education) and BSO (vocational secondary education). In the Veenkoloniën, the following levels were distinguished: VWO (pre-university education), HAVO (general secondary education) and VMBO (vocational secondary education). Migration history relates to the geographic background of the parents and was split into three categories: both parents born outside the region, one or both parents born in the region, and one or both parents born in the local community.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables (percentages) used for the logistic regression analysis with respect to 13–21 year students of secondary schools in the Westhoek (Flanders, Belgium) (611 students, April 2005) and the Veenkoloniën (The Netherlands) (294 students, April 2004).

	The Westhoek (Flanders, Belgium)	The Veenkoloniën (The Netherlands)
<i>Migration intentions with respect to the region</i>		
Intention to leave the region	35	53
<i>Background</i>		
Female	60	51
Traditional family	78	84
Strong support of parents	85	94
<i>Type of education</i>		
Vocational secondary (BSO/Vmbo)	24	37
Technical and general secondary (TSO (incl KSO)/Havo)	41	37
General secondary and pre-university (ASO/Vwo)	35	26
<i>Migration history</i>		
<i>Roots of parents</i>		
No local/regional roots	11	35
Regional	41	33
Local	48	33
<i>Perception of employment prospects</i>		
Expects to find a job outside the region	35	66
<i>Identification with the home region</i>		
<i>Representation: image base</i>		
Socioeconomic	12	56
Visual-figurative	24	24
Socio-cultural	64	20
<i>Representation: valuation</i>		
Positive	46	3
Neutral	43	91
Negative	11	6
Strong local attachment	15	18

Table 2

Result logistic regression analysis of the intentions of students of secondary schools in the Westhoek to live outside the region.

	Bivariate B	Model1 B	Model 2 B	Model 3 B
<i>Background</i>				
Female	.01	.05	.14	.16
(ref.: male)				
Traditional family	-.32	-.28	-.28	-.10
(ref.: Other, especially one parent family)				
Strong support of parents	.12	.06	.14	.25
(ref.: weak)				
<i>Type of education</i>				
(ref.: Vocational secondary (BSO))				
Technical secondary	.21	.27	-.01	.01
(TSO (incl. KSO))				
General secondary (ASO)	.35	.40*	-.20	-.08
<i>Migration history</i>				
<i>Roots of parents</i>				
(ref.: No local/regional roots)				
Regional	-.80**	-.77**	-.49	-.19
Local	-.84***	-.78**	-.61*	-.39
<i>Employment prospects</i>				
Expects to find a job outside Westhoek	1.47***	—	1.46***	1.38***
(ref.: in the Westhoek)				
<i>Identification with the home region</i>				
<i>Representation: image base</i>				
(ref.: socioeconomic)				
Visual-figurative	-.22	—	—	.14
Socio-cultural	-.23	—	—	-.19
Representation: neutral or positive	-.122***	—	—	-.121***
(ref.: negative)				
Strong local attachment	-.165***	—	—	-.151***
(ref.: no strong local attachment)				
<i>Constant</i>				
Initial – 2 log likelihood		-.04	-.70	.09
Model – 2 log likelihood		781.12	728.06	636.71
Chi ²		767.82	658.74	539.84
Number of degrees of freedom		13.31	69.31	96.87
Significance		7	8	12
Nagelkerke R ²		.07	.00	.00
N		.03	.16	.25
		602	568	498

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

In Model 2, perceptions of employment opportunities were based on the question: 'Where do you expect to find a job?' Two categories were defined for this: within or outside the region.

Model 3 includes three different indicators of identification with the home region. The pupils were asked to note the first few words that came to mind when thinking about the Westhoek/the Veenkoloniën. Following Haartsen et al. (2000, 2003), representations of the region are derived by categorizing these associations into two dimensions: the image-base dimension and the valuation dimension. The image-base dimension consists of three categories based on three ways of approaching the world: 'what the world means', 'what the world looks like' and 'how the world works'. For this dimension, the associations were classified into socio-cultural associations, visual-figurative associations or socioeconomic associations. For the valuation dimension, the associations were classified as positive, neutral or negative. The third indicator of identification refers to the attachment to the local community and is measured by means of three statements: 'It is nice living in this place'; 'You can count yourself lucky if you live here'; 'I live here but I could also feel at home somewhere else'. A Likert scale was constructed combining the responses that can be interpreted as signs of local attachment.

Table 3

Result logistic regression analysis of the intentions of students of secondary schools in The Veenkoloniën to live outside the region.

	Bivariate B	Model1 B	Model 2 B	Model 3 B
<i>Background</i>				
Female (ref.: male)	.19	.09	.45	–.11
Traditional family (ref.: Other, especially one parent family)	.04	–.04	–.19	–.13
Strong support of parents (ref.: weak)	.51	.84	–.30	.24
Type of education (ref.: Vocational secondary (Vmbo))				
General secondary (Havo)	.90***	1.09***	.55	1.08*
Pre-university secondary (Vwo)	1.44***	1.52***	.92*	1.00*
<i>Migration history</i>				
Roots of parents (ref.: No local/regional roots)				
Regional	–.90***	–1.00***	–1.17**	–1.56***
Local	–1.83***	–2.02***	–1.84***	–2.47***
<i>Employment prospects</i>				
Expects to find a job outside the Veenkoloniën (ref.: in Veenkoloniën)	1.35***	–	1.81***	1.21**
<i>Identification with the home region</i>				
Representation: image base (ref.: socioeconomic)				
Visual-figurative	.49	–	–	1.13**
Socio-cultural	.29	–	–	.42
Representation: neutral or positive (ref.: negative)	–1.02*	–	–	–.29
Strong local attachment (ref.: no strong local attachment)	–1.29***	–	–	–1.15*
<i>Constant</i>		–.46	–.20	–.08
Initial – 2 log likelihood		400.91	275.64	220.11
Model – 2 log likelihood		337.88	207.06	155.81
Chi ²		63.03	68.57	64.30
Number of degrees of freedom		7	8	12
Significance		.00	.00	.00
Nagelkerke R ²		.26	.39	.44
N		290	200	159

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

5. Results

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences between the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën with respect to the dependent and independent variables. The most striking difference is that the majority (53 percent) of the young people in the Veenkoloniën intend to leave the region, while two-thirds of the youth in the Westhoek intend to stay in the region. Other important differences relate to migration history and identification with the home region. While most of the young people in the Westhoek have roots in the region (for 48 percent, one or both parents were born in the local community and for 89 percent, one or both parents were born locally or in the region), more than one-third of the young people in the Veenkoloniën have parents who were both born outside the region.

There were also striking differences with respect to the representations of the region. The pupils were asked for the first words that came to mind when thinking about the Westhoek/the Veenkoloniën. Fig. 3 summarizes a random sample of these for both regions. They can be classified according to the image-base dimension (socio-cultural, visual-figurative or socioeconomic) and the valuation dimension (positive, neutral or negative). The socio-economic dimension dominates in the representations of the

Veenkoloniën: 'agriculture', 'peat digging', 'cows and farms'. Socio-cultural aspects are dominant in the representations of the Westhoek: 'the place where my friends live', 'peaceful atmosphere, superb', 'gangster paradise'.

Almost half of the young people in the Westhoek have positive representations of the region, while only three percent of the youth in the Veenkoloniën have positive representations. Typical positive representations of the Westhoek are: 'beautiful landscape with historical value', 'cosy, pleasant', 'party people'. They appreciate the social atmosphere (the social-cultural aspects) and the beautiful landscape (visual-figurative aspects). Very few young people in the Veenkoloniën have positive representations. However, the positive representations in the Veenkoloniën refer to similar aspects as in the Westhoek: 'quiet and pleasant', 'nice area, nice towns', 'really fun hang-out'.

Negative representations predominantly refer to the 'rural dull', in social-cultural as well as visual-figurative respects. Negative representations in the Veenkoloniën are: 'long, straight and boring canals', 'so boring', 'a stupid, old-fashioned area'. References to the 'rural dull' in the Westhoek are: 'boring, simple, limited life', 'peasants' hole', 'no parties'. These representations refer to the social-cultural aspects of the 'rural dull'. Remarkably, some negative representations refer to more 'urban' characteristics, such as 'too noisy', 'crowded', 'criminality, drugs, gangsters'.

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the logistic regression analysis for the pupils in the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën. In both regions, the migration intentions can be understood in relation to migration history, perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region. No significant effects of gender, parental household and parental support were found. In both the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën, the young people who expect to find a job within the region and young people who feel highly attached to the local community are most inclined to stay in the region. However, there are striking differences between the regions with respect to the relevance of educational level and migration history. In the case of the Westhoek, in Model 1, ASO pupils were more likely to want to leave the region; however, after

The Westhoek ...

• pleasant • everything you need is here • beer • bumpkin drive • peasants' town • culture • the place where my friends live • near the French border • there's a lot going on • gangster paradise • gangster city • history • cosy • cosy, pleasant • good • good • good, can better • green, agriculture • it's very nice here • I can have a night out here • Ypres • I live good here • small town • rural • landscapes • nice • nice to live here • nice region • my friends live here • beautiful rural, very green • beautiful landscape with historical value • beautiful nature • beautiful region, lots of nature • neutral • I never will leave again • East, west, home's best • broad Flemish (dialect) • nice and a lot going on • it smells good here • peaceful, nature, green • peaceful • peaceful • peaceful • peaceful • peaceful, nice atmosphere • peaceful atmosphere, superb • boring • boring, simple, limited life • single tracks (MTB) • strand, dialect, shops • not enough nature, too much traffic • tourist region • fabulous region with lots of opportunities • very green • lots of nature • many tourists • facilities (shops) • friends • friend, relatives • Westhoek bitch • World war • very good region

The Veenkoloniën ...

• at the peat museum • at the peat digging in former times • it's all peat bog • farmers • farmers • farmers • farmers and lots of space • the girl that they recently found in the peat • villages or small towns • Drenthe & Groningen • a boring area • no idea • grass in marshes • Groningen, Drenthe • countryside • the Stadskanaal (canal) • small places or villages • 'kwalsierbolle' • agriculture • most times at villages • museum railway 'Star' • nothing • not very famous, boring environment • origin of Pekela • place around the village • countryside • school project • peace, cosiness • Stadskanaal, architecture and quite bare here (in negative sense) • peat • peat • peat • peat, marsh, nature • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat bog • peat • peat • peat quarry • peat museum • former times • where you can find a lot of peat • don't know • work and peat digging

Fig. 3. Random selection of answers to the question 'What is your first thought about (name of the region)?'. Above: The Westhoek; Below: The Veenkoloniën.

employment prospects were entered (Model 2), no effect of educational level on migration intentions could be found. Employment prospects act here as an intervening variable for educational level in the Westhoek. In the Veenkoloniën, VWO and HAVO pupils were more inclined to leave the region than VMBO pupils in the bivariate model and in Models 1 and 2, VWO pupils were even more likely to leave than HAVO pupils. The effect of educational level diminishes after controlling for perception of employment opportunities but is still significant for VWO pupils and is also significant for HAVO and VWO pupils after entering identification with the home region. Apparently, within the context of the Veenkoloniën, educational level refers not only to differences in employment expectations but also to differences in cultural orientation. These differences in cultural orientation that are connected with educational level are separate from the cultural factors included in model 3 and reflect cultural differences related to the Dutch educational system.

In both regions, young people with parents who were born locally or within the region are more inclined to stay than young people with parents who come from outside the region. However, in the case of the Westhoek, the effect of migration history diminishes after controlling for perception of employment opportunities and disappears after controlling for identification with the home region. On the other hand, migration history affects the migration intentions of young people in the Veenkoloniën even after controlling for perception of employment opportunities and identification with the home region. In the Westhoek, migration history interacts with perception of employment opportunities and identification with the home region, while in the Veenkoloniën migration history seems to be independent of perceived employment opportunities and identification with the home region. This result reflects differences in the meaning of migration history in relation to differences in settlement history. As a consequence of the recent industrial colonization of this part of the Veenkoloniën, many inhabitants are not rooted in the region (see also Table 1) and are aware of a tradition of migration.

The positive relationship between the intention to leave the Veenkoloniën and a visual-figurative image base of the Veenkoloniën in Model 3 is apparently related to the unattractiveness of the landscape of this region for residential use, based on the opinion of most pupils.

In summary, two factors, that is, perception of employment opportunities and identification with the home region, are decisive for the migration intentions of young people in the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën, while the migration intentions of those in the Veenkoloniën can be understood in terms of educational level, migration history and the representation of the region as well.

6. Discussion

A growing number of rural areas in Europe are confronted with dejuvenation. Together with the ageing of the European population, youth migration related to the transition from secondary to higher education is increasingly responsible for the declining numbers of young people in these areas. This youth migration is part of national and sub-national migration systems that can be described as the 'escalator' model. Alongside the traditional peripheral rural areas in Europe, which are in a remote position from main urban centres and national capitals, 'peripheral' rural areas within small and urbanized countries, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, are also faced with a growing and selective out-migration of young people.

The results of the analysis of the migration intentions of rural youth in the Westhoek (Flanders, Belgium) and the Veenkoloniën (the Netherlands) are in line with the findings of Bjarnason and

Thorlindsson (2006) in relation to Iceland. Perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region appear to be the most important factors for explaining migration expectations (in the Icelandic study) or migration intentions (in the case of the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën). The migration intentions of young rural people are therefore significantly connected with hard structural factors – where they expect to find work – on the one hand, and soft cultural factors – where they feel at home – on the other.

The role of migration history is more ambiguous. In line with the findings of Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006), migration history is an important factor in the Veenkoloniën but not in the Westhoek. Although in both cases young people who are rooted in the local community or the region are less inclined to leave the region than those whose parents come from elsewhere, in the case of the Westhoek the migration history does not appear to help explain the intention to leave the region after controlling for employment prospects and geographical identity. In the Westhoek, migration history, employment prospects and identification with the home region interact to influence the intention to migrate, while migration history is an important, independent factor in the Veenkoloniën. This difference between the two regions might be understood in terms of regional differences in the meaning of migration history. Traditionally, the Westhoek is a highly autochthonous rural area with a long settlement history (Van der Haegen et al., 2000). Many young people are still 'rooted' in the region and their families have lived in the same region, village or even house for many generations. For many young people, staying in the region is a matter of course and a continuation of the family tradition. It cannot be expected that the factor of migration history will have a strong impact in this context. In contrast, in historical terms the local communities in the Veenkoloniën are recently-colonized communities with a migration tradition (In't Veld-Langeveld, 1957; Terluin et al., 1999). These communities are more interconnected with other parts of the Netherlands and display more variability in their migration history and identification with the home region. In this context, it can be expected that migration history would have an impact.

The role of educational level is also ambiguous. In line with the findings of Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006), an interaction was found between educational level and perceptions of employment opportunities in both regions. However, after entering all the variables in the models, educational level appeared to be an insignificant factor for explaining migration intentions in the Westhoek. In the Veenkoloniën, more highly educated young people are more inclined to leave the region even after controlling for perceptions of employment opportunities and identification with the home region. Apparently, in relation to the Veenkoloniën, educational level refers not only to differences in employment prospects but also to differences in cultural orientation related to the Dutch educational system. In the Veenkoloniën, as in the Netherlands in general, highly educated young people are more inclined than those with less education to detach themselves from their families and home region and to start an independent life as a single person living in an urban setting (Aassve et al., 2002; Harts, 2008). In the Westhoek and in Flanders in general (Corijn and Manting, 2000), staying in the parental house and home region is something most young people do not question. They would only consider leaving their home region for employment reasons.

Identification with the home region is a decisive factor when it comes to the migration intentions of young rural people in both the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën. It is clear that young people with a strong local attachment are most inclined to stay in the region. However, the representation indicators (image base and valuation) are not consistent for both research regions. In the Westhoek,

migration intentions correlate with a negative evaluation of the region. This is in line with the results for the local attachment indicator. In the Veenkoloniën, however, migration intentions correspond with a visual-figurative way of looking at the area, while the evaluation of the area is not a significant factor. This underlines the opinion of the young people that the Veenkoloniën landscape is unattractive for residential use.

The different roles of migration history, educational level and the image base in the Westhoek and the Veenkoloniën is illustrative of the huge variety of rural areas in Europe. Part of this variety is nation-specific, which is illustrated by the different role of educational level in our research. Another aspect of this variety is regional character. Differences in settlement history and differences in attractiveness of the landscape for consumptive functions appeared to be relevant to the migration intentions of the rural youth. This finding underlines the nation-specific character of rurality in Europe and the importance of comparative research (Hoggart et al., 1995).

In conclusion, and in the context of the potential for population development of the peripheral rural areas of North-West Europe, it is clear that the growing importance of an individualized perspective will make a selective out-migration of socially mobile young people more common. However, it can be stated that attempts to encourage young people to stay in rural areas should focus on improving employment and educational opportunities, or perceptions of them, by reinforcing local attachment and strengthening the quality of the residential function.

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